

I'll be here 'till the end of time by getawaydreamer

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Families of Choice, Found Family, Friends to Lovers, Friendship, Happy Ending, Homophobic Language, Homophobic Slurs, It's very slight and maybe others wouldn't interpret it as suicidal thoughts but just to be safe, Jonathan's POV, Lonnie Byers should be its own warning, M/M, Minor Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Read Author's Notes, Suicidal Ideation, Suicidal Thoughts

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Erica Sinclair, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lonnie Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

"He is going to Lonnie's to look for Will. And if he doesn't find him there, he's going into the forest to look for clues.

He decides that it will be like when they go to the cliff: he won't let Will fall and drown.

He won't."

Or:

The Party & Co, through the years, told mostly from Jonathan's POV and ft. brotherhood, what it means to be a family, a quarry, lightning, and some iconic songs.

I'll be here 'till the end of time

Author's Note:

Hello! Just a heads up, Lonnie uses homophobic slurs (the f word), and we see into Mike's head (or at least, my interpretation of it) during the scene where he jumps from the cliff: these thoughts could be said to border on suicidal ideation. Proceed with caution if you find this triggering, take care of yourselves!

I obviously don't own anything, and I'm making no profit off of this.

I don't allow translations or reposts of any kind anywhere.

He's 10; Will is 5. Spring has come to a close, the sweltering warmth of summer in Indiana turns the air humid, turns his thin hair into flying wisps, tail-ends of a bird's wing. In September, his brother will begin kindergarten.

Their parents are arguing. Again. Will is huddling in the corner of his bedroom, hands over his ears.

He pulls his hands away from his ears, clutches them in his slightly bigger ones. Both of them have bitten off most of their nails. He tilts his head towards the window they had opened to let some air in. Will nods, unfolds himself from the floor.

They slip through the window, land on the unruly grass outside the bungalow. Their parents' screams fade away as they run away from the house, sweat gathering on their foreheads and running down their backs. He pushes ahead of Will, turns around to holler at him to hurry. Will laughs. After ten minutes of running, they slow down to a trot until they reach their destination.

The cliff overlooking the lake is empty. He assumes that teenagers must come here when night falls, running away from their own homes, their own parents. But for now, under the bright sun of an

early afternoon, no one is here but them and the birds hiding in the trees behind them. He takes Will's hand, leads him to the edge. They sit down, their feet dangling over the water.

He always makes sure they are careful. He won't let Will fall in.

"Dad's gonna leave," says Will. He is kicking his feet in the air.

"You don't know that," he says.

"They never stop fighting."

He can't deny that. If he could, he would make them stop. Sometimes, he thinks it would be better for all of them if Lonnie left, but he doesn't know if Will would agree with him. He calls him Lonnie in his head, where no one can hear. No one can judge.

"It's my fault," Will whispers.

"What are you talking about?"

"Dad hates me. He says I was born wrong."

"He doesn't mean it," he says, putting his arm around Will's bony shoulders. His brother doesn't say anything: they both know he's lying. "And if he means it, he's an idiot. You're awesome."

"You have to say that 'cause you're my brother."

"I say that 'cause it's true. You'll make a ton of friends when you go to school in September, and you'll see I'm telling the truth."

"Do you have any friends?" Will asks.

"Yeah, a couple." He doesn't have the heart to tell him he can barely open his mouth to answer when a teacher asks him to participate. "You weren't born wrong, don't pay attention to him."

"Okay."

Will lifts his left hand, flutters his fingers. In the quiet, it sounds like a bird taking flight, batting its wings against the muggy air.

"It's like a mirror," says Will, tilting his head towards the lake.

"I guess, you can see your face in the water, but it's kinda twisted up."

"Not like that," says Will. "Like another world. We see through the mirror into another world, and the creatures there watch us back."

"I never thought of it like that," he answers, not entirely sure what Will is talking about.

They stay there for so many hours that the blue sky begins to turn rose in the horizon, foreshadowing sunset. Night will be here soon, and their mother must have realized they left, is probably worried sick. He tells Will that, and they gingerly get up from the edge, careful not to stumble over any rocks. They walk away from the cliff and the quarry. They leave the trees and its birds behind.

When they get back to the house, their mom tells them that Lonnie went outside for a little while. They're going to eat pizza and watch a movie. Will claps when he's told that he gets to pick the movie.

Jonathan knows their father will not come back that night. If he comes back at all.

He's 10; Will is 5. His first day of kindergarten has come and gone. He had dropped him off with few minutes to spare, watching him walk into the building with stooped shoulders and the giant backpack their mom bought him covering his back like the shell of a snail.

When he picks him up, Will is grinning and humming, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He only sees him this happy when he is drawing.

"Had a good day, buddy?"

"The best," says Will, as they begin the long trek home. He's been trying to teach Will to ride a bike, but even if he could, they only have one. "I made a friend. His name's Mike."

"What's he like?"

“He talks a lot, but he doesn’t mind if I’m quiet. And he shared his chocolate pudding with me. He asked me to be his friend.”

“He sounds great, buddy.”

“And his eyes are pretty,” Will adds, smile still on his face. His shoulders are not stooped anymore: he is standing tall, skipping over lines in the pavement.

He grabs Will by the shoulders, bends until their eyes are at the same height and Will can see the urgency in his. “You can’t say that, Will.”

“Why not?”

“Dad wouldn’t like it. A lot of people wouldn’t like it.”

“What about you?”

The smile has flown away from his face, a bird startled by the loud cocking of a shotgun in the silent forest. His eyes are shiny.

“I don’t mind, but you can’t go around saying that. Do you understand?”

Will nods.

“Good, good. C’mere.” He pulls him into his arms, swings them from side to side until Will is laughing quietly. “Wanna go to the cliff?”

“Yeah, I can show you a drawing I made in class,” says Will. “Mike said he’s going to write a story to go with it.”

Will doesn’t stop talking on their way to the cliff. He doesn’t add much to the conversation, content to listen to his brother ramble about Mike and how cool he is. He elbows Will softly when they are close to other people, so that he will watch his words. Will’s voice rises and falls accordingly, like shallow waves.

Leaves lie on the forest floor, turning the grounds golden and brown. They crackle under their sneakers.

Once their feet are hanging over the dark waters of the quarry, he

feels comfortable turning to Will and letting him speak about Mike freely, the way he couldn't before.

"What color are his eyes?"

"Brown, like the chocolate mom buys sometimes. Or like the pudding he shared with me," Will says. His words carry through the air around them, loud and clear, until they sink into the quarry.

They are the only ones who hear them.

He's 12; Will is 7. Will tells him that Mike is coming home with them. He's only been in their house a couple of times over the past two years, and he knows it's because Will doesn't want Mike to meet Lonnie. He's barely managed to cross paths with Joyce, and that's mostly because she picks Will up from the Wheelers' from time to time.

Will loves spending time there, hiding in the basement with Mike, playing games only they understand.

They bike home, all three of them. Mom was finally able to save up enough to buy Will one. Will says that whenever he rolls down the street, he feels free, almost as if he were flying.

The house is empty. He has no idea where Lonnie is, but he prays (he doesn't know who he's praying to, since he doesn't believe in anything) that he will come back much, much later. Will and Mike decide to watch a movie; he makes them popcorn and leaves them alone. From his bedroom, as he does his homework, he can hear them laughing at something (it was a horror movie, he didn't know they could also be funny). When he is done with his homework, he shuts off the world by listening to some music.

Over two hours later, he emerges back into the living room. Will and Mike are still there, lying on the floor. Mike is talking rapidly, waving his hands in the air in an uncoordinated dance. Will has a notebook in his lap, a couple of crayons next to his folded knee. He doesn't speak much, but Mike doesn't seem to mind. He's listening to Mike,

though, attentive tilt to his head.

“Mike, are you staying for dinner?” he asks, breaking into their little bubble.

“I don’t think so, mom said she’d pick me up a little after six.”

“That’ll be soon, make sure you’re ready to go,” he says, and wanders into the kitchen. He needs to check whether mom left them anything. He could do grilled cheese sandwiches if she hasn’t.

He finds two pieces of lasagne hidden behind a six-pack and almost punches the air. He pulls them out, thinks that he will heat them up once Mike has left.

When he comes back to the living room, he gets closer to where the two friends are sitting on the floor. From his vantage point, he can see what Will is drawing.

Mike’s eyes.

He’s 13; Will’s 7. He’s turning 8 in a few weeks, as he keeps reminding him. Mike is once more in their house after school. It was their mom’s day off: she is in the kitchen, making a casserole for dinner. She’s always happy to see Mike and Will playing together: one day, after Lonnie stormed out, she said, soft as a snowdrop, that she was glad Will had a best friend, someone who cared so much about him. He had responded that Will had them (not Lonnie, never Lonnie), and mom had just shook her head, murmuring that it was different.

He thinks he gets it. Mike is not family. He’s not bonded by blood to Will, but he still cares. He listens to him, keeps the drawings that Will gives him, stands up to the bigger boys at school who he knows give them – especially Will – trouble. He chose Will, and shows no signs of regretting that choice.

They are watching a movie in the living room, as seems to be the custom now. It must be a pretty scary one, because Will huddles closer and closer to Mike. They are sitting like that, pretty close but

not touching, when Lonnie comes back from wherever he's been. (he stopped caring a long time ago).

Everyone freezes when Lonnie enters, even Mike who only knows about him from the very, very small bits Will has told him. The door shuts slowly behind him, hinges whining as the wood fights the wind in order to click shut. He looks at his mom, then at Will. His mom's eyes are locked on Lonnie's, who is staring right at Will and Mike. Will is looking at the floor; Mike's gaze is darting all over the room, looking for safe shore and finding none. He eventually washes up on the littered beach that is Lonnie's eyes. He sees him gulp.

"Who the fuck are you?" Lonnie asks.

"He's Mike, Will's friend," mom answers. "Be nice to him."

"Sure," Lonnie says. He lights a cigarette, takes a drag. "Are you staying for dinner, kid?"

"No, he was just gonna call his mom to come pick him up," says Will, lifting his eyes from the stain on the carpet where Lonnie spilled beer two nights ago. Mike scrambles to follow Will's made-up statement, speaking to his mother in murmurs before announcing she'll be here in ten minutes.

Lonnie goes to the bathroom. Will apologises for kicking him out like that, but Mike says he understands. The ten minutes pass surprisingly quickly considering that all of them are so tense someone could play a bow against them as if they were a violin and they would probably produce sound.

"Try not to be such a fag, kid, or no one will want to be your friend," says Lonnie while they are eating dinner. "Don't know why anyone will want to be your friend in the first place, but that kid looked pretty faggy, too."

Will barely touches his food after that.

Two hours later, their parents are arguing in their bedroom. He imagines Will sniffing on his bed, clamping his ears shut with a pillow. He grabs his boombox, goes to Will's room and knocks on the

door.

Two long ones. One short one. Their little code.

“We gonna listen to music?” asks Will when he sees the boombox.

“Yeah, but not in here.”

At Will’s look of confusion, he tilts his head in the direction of the window. His brother scrambles to get dressed, and five minutes later, they are trotting across the fields that border their house. Spring is on its way, but has not yet reached Indiana, which means the night is chilly: mist forms in front of their mouths as they run, Will shivers three times on the way to the quarry. No one is in sight.

A branch breaks beneath his foot. Will jumps.

“Sorry,” he says. He takes a small flashlight out of his pocket and leads them to the edge carefully, subjecting their chosen bit of land to an examination under the bright beam of the flashlight before he helps Will sit down.

He sets the boombox next to him, presses play. The cassette that has spent the past ten days inside begins playing. It fills the hidden corners of the quarry, travels back to the trees guarding their backs, bounces off the rocks around them.

The waters below are still as Sting sings that he’s going to send an SOS to the world.

A message in a bottle.

“Can we send a message in a bottle from here?” Will asks, banging his head to the music.

“No, we don’t have an ocean to send it through.”

“We have the lake.”

“It wouldn’t work.”

“Do we have to go back?”

“Yes, but don’t pay attention to Lonnie. He’s an asshole.”

“Why are you calling him Lonnie? He’s dad.”

“He’s a lot of things, but he’s no dad, Will,” he says. He expects Will to defend their father, but he doesn’t. Will looks at him for a long time as Sting keeps repeating the same line over and over. When he turns his head away, his eyebrows are pulled together in a frown.

“Nobody would get our message anyways, even if we had an ocean,” says Will.

“If he wasn’t with us, Mike would,” he says, and Will smiles.

He’s 13; Will is 8. He turned eight four months ago. The summer heat has once more invaded their bungalow, and their parents are fighting, as usual. A crash comes from the living room, and Will flinches. They are sitting side by side against the door to his bedroom, eyes fixed on the window. The red sky is slowly turning dark blue. It’s drizzling. A fan is a couple feet away from them, spinning slowly. It’s probably older than both of them.

“You think we should check on them?” asks Will.

“It’s safer if we stay here, mom can handle it.” He’s not sure she can, but he knows he needs to protect Will.

The hum of the fan and the closed door smother the screaming from outside, the words mostly unintelligible except for a few scattered “asshole”, “fag”, “useless”, “hate”. Will curves into himself so that his shoulders reach his ears. Will’s lips wobble, and he encircles him around the shoulders, telling him it’ll be alright.

Ten minutes later, the shouts stop. The front door bangs closed. A knock comes behind their backs.

“It’s me,” their mom says. “Can you let me in?”

He opens the door. Their mom is smoking a cigarette; her nose is red. She wipes at her eyes, even though they are mostly dry by now.

“Your dad, he...” she breaks off. Swallows. Looks at him.

He already knows what she is going to say.

She bends a little so she’s at Will’s level, clasps his shoulders. Will’s lip keeps wobbling. He shakes his head, as if he also knows what’s coming but doesn’t want it to touch him yet.

“Your dad left, sweetie, and he’s not coming back this time.”

Will doesn’t stop crying for a long time after that. Their mom never loosens her hold, even when all the lights in the house go off and the fan stops spinning.

Eventually, she heads out to check the fuse box.

“Do you want to go the quarry?”

Will shakes his head twice, goes to his bedroom, and comes back holding a sheet of paper. A castle is drawn on it, four figures standing next to it. He recognises himself (the camera he bought last month with the money he got lawn-mowing hangs from his neck), mom, Will – in a violet robe – and Mike, a sword in his right hand.

“I want us to build that,” says Will.

“A castle?”

“Our castle. Castle Byers.”

Their mom returns and tells them that she has no idea why the power went off, but if it’s still like this the next day, she’ll call the electric company.

“We want to go build Castle Byers,” says Will, showing her the drawing.

“Now? Sweetie, there’s a drizzle. There may be a storm coming.”

“I want to build Castle Byers tonight,” Will insists.

Mom bites her lip. They trade looks as she wrings her hands.

"I'll go with him, keep him safe. We'll build it in the forest, as close as possible."

"Okay, but if the rain gets bad or if you hear anything, you come right back here, you get me?"

"Yes, mom," the brothers say in unison.

The rain gets really bad: their clothes cling to their skin, their footsteps tread on water instead of solid ground. They hear the whistle of the trees bending backwards and forwards with the wind. Will almost stabs his thumb with a nail.

But after a long night, once the storm has passed, Castle Byers stands tall in the forest close to their house, and Will is grinning at him.

"Thanks for helping me, Jonathan."

"Anytime, buddy," he says, ruffling his brother's hair.

He's 14; Will is 9. Mike and Will make a new friend: his name's Lucas. He's charismatic and clever, and loyal. Mom once confesses to him that, while she loves Mike, Lucas is more polite, which she appreciates.

Will likes him; that much is clear.

But envy lurks in his eyes, hiding in a gaze that is usually directed towards the floor instead of anywhere else. When the three of them come to their house, Mike and Lucas talk hurriedly, as if the words will disappear from their minds if not uttered quickly enough. Will prefers to stay quiet. He's still included, though, never forgotten about by his two friends.

Will even confesses that Lucas is easier to draw than Mike, because he doesn't fidget or bounce his leg as much.

One day, green is no longer the prevalent color in Will's hazel eyes.

"Why were you jealous of Lucas?" he asks, months later. The first

snowfall of the year came last week, and they are bundled up in the sitting room, in front of the heater.

“I wasn’t jealous.”

“You can’t talk to me, Will. I won’t judge.”

Will is silent for a beat. Two.

“He and Mike seemed to talk so easily, you know. I was afraid that Mike would realise I’m boring and leave me. It’s stupid, I know.”

“Mike would never leave you.”

“I know that now.”

“And what about Lucas? Are you afraid he’s going to leave you?”

“Not anymore, but I wasn’t afraid in the same way. Like losing Mike scared me more for some reason,” Will says in a whisper, as if he knows that something about his confession is ‘wrong’; Jonathan doesn’t ask him to speak up (Will needs to learn to be careful about what he says to whom and where. It will keep him safe). “It still scares me more, I guess, although I really like Lucas, too. It’s strange. Anyways, we’re fine.”

“I’m glad.”

He’s 15; Will is 10. His sixteenth birthday is coming up. A new addition comes into “The Party” (that’s what they all call it, although he has no idea what they’re talking about). His name is Dustin, and if he thought that Mike and Lucas were talkative, it was because he hadn’t met Dustin.

He seems to be the missing puzzle piece in “The Party”. Will has learned his lesson from the previous time, and this time, needs no reassurance before he is ready to accept Dustin into the fold of the little friend group he’s a part of.

Dustin is very difficult to draw: he can never sit still.

He's 16; Will is 10. His mom got him a brand new camera for his birthday. That explains why they've been eating so much pasta for the past month. But the Nikon F3 SLR is worth it, he thinks, selfishly. He snaps so many pictures of their house that his mom tells him to stop because the film is also expensive.

It's just the three of them celebrating. Lonnie didn't even call, and he has no friends. Mom had suggested he invite Mike and Nancy, since she is his age and they share some classes, but he didn't want to feel uncomfortable in his own home and on his birthday like he does at school.

Mike and Nancy didn't come, but Mike called him in the afternoon and invited him to their next campaign.

Mom and Will sing happy birthday and they cut the cake. It's a simple one: vanilla and buttercream. Two birthdays ago, mom bought a red velvet cake from the grocery store that was amazing, but he figures the camera was enough expense this time.

The vanilla one is okay, and his mom managed not to burn it.

Afterwards, he and Will go to the cliff, several layers of clothes sheltering their bodies from the January chill. His camera swings back and forth where it hangs in front of his chest as they traipse through the dark woods. The closer they get to the cliff, the louder the music grows: it comes from a party. They hide behind a tree and watch his classmates dance and drink from red plastic cups. Steve Harrington is doing a keg stand. When he finishes, he stands up gracefully, flips his hair, and kisses one of the girls standing nearby.

A girl almost tumbles into the bonfire they have lit halfway between the trees and the cliff, and everybody screams. A guy catches her in time and sends her away with her friends.

"We could go down to the lake," says Will.

"Yeah, I don't want you seeing this anyways."

Will rolls his eyes. They find their way to the lake they usually only

see from the cliff. Up close, the still waters reflect the stars and moonlight, making pinpricks of brightness gleam in the darkness. That dim reflection, the moonlight, a flashlight, and a hue of light coming from the bonfire are the only sources of light they have.

“Can you take pictures in here?” asks Will.

“Yeah, but I don’t know how good they’ll look,” he answers, speaking a little louder than usual to be heard over the heavy beat of a drum falling from above in soft waves. “I wish we had more light.”

“We can come back tomorrow.”

“I’ll try to take a couple and we’ll go home.”

The lack of light would have been an issue even from the top of the cliff. But even in the dark, the cliff was familiar, and there was something reassuring in that familiarity. He didn’t need to see anything to take a picture because he already knew the position of every rock in that place.

It was his.

It was theirs. His and Will’s.

He clicks the camera on, shrugs when Will knocks his shoulder against his hip.

He’s gonna take a photo of the lake first.

A lightning bolt cracks open the sky, lights up the quarry like ten spotlights have been turned on in its vicinity. The music from above screeches to a halt.

Another bolt comes, light fracturing into spider-webs across the dark skies.

A few people scream. Shoes scramble over rocks in an attempt to get away.

A third bolt strikes, paints the scene a bright blue.

“Get out of here!” someone shouts above them.

“It won’t hurt us,” says Will as another flash of lightning causes his face to glow. “It’s just lightning.”

Jonathan takes 15 pictures that night.

One of them is of a bolt of lightning that breaks off into 13 small rivers of electricity.

He’s 16; Will is 11. “The Party” is having a sleepover in their house. (Will has asked him to stop putting “The Party” in between quotation marks). Dustin has spent the past ten minutes talking to his mom about a science project involving frogs. Lucas and Mike are playing with some action figures, and Will is drawing.

He wants to go to the cliff, but isn’t sure he should ask.

“I’m thinking of going to the cliff tonight,” he tells Will in an undertone.

His mom asks Dustin a question about his experiment. Mike is pretending to be Darth Vader, his attempt at a gravelly voice more similar to a cat being strangled in a back-alley than anything else. Will keeps shading his drawing.

“We can take the boys with us,” he answers.

“To the cliff?”

“Yeah, that way we can go together without me leaving them behind. Even if we left while they slept, Mike would probably notice I’m gone. He has kind of sixth sense for that.”

He wants to tell Will that he thought the cliff was their place. But he thinks of how Dustin pretends to lose bets so he can give Will some of the comics he knows they can’t afford, and how Lucas allows Will to draw him as much as he wants and tells him not to put himself down for not liking “macho” stuff. He thinks of how Mike made a plan for everyone to pitch in as much money as they could in order to buy

Will an Atari for his last birthday, and how Mike always checks up on him when he notices Will is a little down. He thinks of the last time he picked Will up from the Wheelers', and Mike had told his brother that his house would always be *theirs*.

"So, can they come?" asks Will.

"Yeah, sure, we can go after dinner."

And that's how they end up, the five of them, walking into the road behind the cliff, Lucas and Jonathan carrying flashlights. Dustin is swearing like it's going out of style, and the night chill drives shivers down Mike's back.

"Is this safe? Like at all? Because I'm too young to fall to my death," says Dustin.

"Jon and I come here all the time, it's fine," says Will, confidently walking closer to the edge. "We won't let each other fall, come on."

He sits down, Jonathan to his right. Mike gingerly lowers himself on his left, presses his body to Will's. Lucas plops down next to Jonathan, holding onto the rocky surface with both hands. Dustin slowly sits down next to Lucas.

"If anything happens to me, I'm going to find a way to haunt you, Byers."

Will rolls his eyes. He kicks his feet in the air like he always does, leans forward slightly, and Mike clutches his wrist as if Will would go over the edge otherwise, would drown in the waters below if Mike let go.

Will turns his hand to the point where his fingers graze Mike's knuckles.

Dustin is breathing heavily, still muttering curse words. Lucas settles an arm around his shoulders.

"You're never gonna get girls to like you if you can't conquer your fears, man," he says, comforting and teasing in equal measure.

“Shut up, they could like me for other aspects of my personality.”

“Like what? The fact that you never shut up?”

“My conversation topics are interesting,” says Dustin, sufficiently distracted from his panic. He thinks that was Lucas’ plan all along. “They show off my curious nature. Girls like that, don’t they, Jonathan?”

“Yeah, sure they do.” He decides white lies are the better part of valor.

They stay there for a really long time, relishing the tranquillity. Wind whistles through the trees, an owl hoots from inside the foliage, Will hums a song under his breath.

“I think this is the longest I’ve gone without speaking since I was three,” says Dustin as they are getting up to return to the house.

“Maybe we should come back more often,” says Will.

Mike and Lucas laugh. Dustin pouts until Will tells him he doesn’t mind the chatter.

Maybe the cliff could occasionally be The Party’s.

(He’s finally dropping the quotation marks).

He’s 17; Will is 12. Will’s been missing for an entire day now. They have no idea where he could be. The town is going on searches through the forest, probably useless. Lonnie refuses to answer the phone.

He’s going there tomorrow, screw everything. If Lonnie is too high, or drunk, or selfish to not answer, he’ll bring his door down himself, baseball bat in hand. He knows that Will would not have gone with him willingly, but he doesn’t trust their ‘father’ as far as he can throw him, and he needs to see for himself that he doesn’t have Will locked in the trunk of his car.

Their phone was fried by some freak lightning. His mom is losing it a little bit, and he understands. He can barely keep himself from spending the entire day in a constant breakdown. But he needs to be strong for her, for Will.

It's his fault his little brother is gone. If he had been home, if he hadn't wasted time going to the cliff to take pictures, Will would be with them now. Will would be with them if he hadn't been so stupid.

(he tries not to think of what Mike, Lucas and Dustin are doing. Knowing them, they are trying to find him on their own, which is not the worst idea possible, considering how useless law enforcement can be).

He staples another sign on one of the lamp posts outside the school. He's lost count of how many he has hung around town during the day.

"Fuck this," he mutters under his breath, stuffing the rest of the leaflets into his satchel.

He is going to Lonnie's to look for Will. And if he doesn't find him there, he's going into the forest to look for clues.

He decides that it will be like when they go to the cliff: he won't let Will fall and drown.

He won't.

Will's body is found in the quarry. Will was never afraid of those waters. He never, not once, feared falling from the cliff and drowning.

But he did.

He did.

Hopper says he may have crashed his bike and walked into the lake by accident. Maybe he was disoriented. He can tell mom doesn't believe he's dead; she says she saw him in the wall.

Jonathan doesn't know what to believe anymore.

But his body was found. Which means he must be dead.

Will is dead.

Jonathan doesn't know how he's still alive.

(he can't help but think he should have drowned with Will).

He cries himself to sleep that night, listening to The Clash, to all the music he and Will enjoyed.

The last thing he sees before his eyes fall shut against his will is the photograph he took, what seems like eons ago, of the freak lightning.

The last thought that crosses his mind before he succumbs to sleep is that the spider legs of the lightning look strangely similar to some of Will's drawings.

Will was dead. But then, he wasn't. Thank God. Although now there are bad people trying to get El, and he doesn't know what to do, or where she even is, and Lucas is angry with him for whatever reason.

And now he and Dustin are being chased by Troy and James. As if they have any time to waste. They have to find El, then find Lucas (maybe he should apologise, in the interest of keeping the peace, it's what Will would want). And then, they have to find Will.

"Stupid mouthbreather," he gasps as he rounds another tree, Dustin close behind. They have been running through the forest for the past ten minutes.

Without realising, they are going towards the cliff. The muddy floor of the woods transforms into pebbles and rocks. Their feet pounding the floor create a crunching sound, as if they were stepping on D&D figurines.

They reach the road behind the cliff, and Mike feels comforted by its sight. The huge drop, the dangerous edge, the still waters are not

scary to him. They remind him of the night they came here and sat in silence for God knows how long. They remind him of Will swinging his feet, humming, fingers touching his.

Troy threatens Dustin with a knife. Would he dare do something like that? Probably not, but he can't risk it. Him falling would shock them, give Dustin a chance to escape and complete the mission.

Will is not dead. Not yet. But he may be if they don't find him soon.

He thinks of Will swinging his feet, and lifts his left foot. It hang in the air.

He can't tell what Troy and Dustin and James are saying. He doesn't care.

He thinks of Will saying the Demogorgon got him, and lets himself fall.

Will is safe. Will is safe and Jonathan can breathe for the first time in days. He's lying on the hospital bed, bright lights shining down on him, accentuating the purple bags under his eyes. He probably doesn't look much better.

Will is so pale. So small in this hospital bed.

But he's alive.

He opens his eyes, a baby doe waking up after escaping the hunter, and asks if he's okay.

Maybe he looks like he aged twenty years in the past week. Maybe it's the bandage on his hand, covering his newly acquired scar. (he has other scars that Will can't see).

"I'm fine, buddy, I'm fine now." He knows there are tears making themselves at home in the corners of his eyes.

He holds him, his mom at his side running her fingers through his hair. He cries because he feels incredible relief. It's like being at the

cliff, peaceful and safe, and Jonathan wishes he could bottle this feeling and keep it forever, for the rest of his life.

He goes to get The Party. Mike is the only one awake, unsurprisingly, and he wakes Dustin and Lucas up frantically. They run to Will's room, sliding across the hospital linoleum floor, and greet him loudly. Mike doubles over in half, covers Will's chest with his head right above his heart.

He hears them talking about Eleven; Will smiles as they put him up to speed.

Will is safe. He's not alone in the dark anymore.

He's 18; Will is turning 13. It's a Friday, and the party is staying for a sleepover. The Byers household is a flurry of movement. Mrs. Byers is fluttering around the kitchen, cooking a meatloaf, a casserole, baked potatoes, and a salad. Dustin is helping her, grin big on his face as he cuts the veggies for the salad. Mike and Lucas are decorating the sitting room with fairy lights, a giant sign they painted during their lunch break, red and blue feather boas they stole from the theatre closets, and a papier-mâché piñata. Will is watching everything unfold, a small smile on his face.

Jonathan is taking photo after photo. Mike hides his face from the camera as if he were part of the witness protection program. That's before Will comes to help hang the piñata, and Mike feels himself smiling for the camera, almost against his conscious will.

That's the moment a car screeches to a halt outside. A door clangs shut, a knock following on the Byers' door. Mrs. Byers runs to get it, wiping her hands on a dish towel, and it opens to reveal Will's father.

He's hardly been around, thank God. Mike thinks the man should be stuck in the Upside Down, and knows that's rude and unkind (his mom would tell him off for cursing him, even in the privacy of his mind), but it's the truth. Will is better off without him. All the Byers are.

He comes in like he owns the house, kisses Mrs. Byers on the cheek, pats Jonathan on the shoulder once, and heads towards Will. Mrs. Byers wipes her cheek with her shoulder.

"How's my boy?" asks Lonnie. He pulls Will to him, right arm around his shoulder.

"Fine," Will whispers, shrugging him off. He moves closer to Mike.

"You don't wanna hug your old man?"

"Did you bring him anything?" asks Jonathan. His camera is hanging by his side.

"Isn't my presence enough? Are you still taking pictures?"

He shakes his head, lights a cigarette, and drops his body onto the couch, lounging like a cat no one wants.

"Dinner will be ready soon," says Mrs. Byers, squirreling back into the kitchen.

Dinner is a tense affair, and Mike wonders if they shouldn't conjure a lie to get Lonnie out of the house. Is he going to stay the night? It's bizarre: Will clearly doesn't want him here.

"One thing you can be sure I don't miss about this place is your cooking, Joyce," he says, because mean things seem to be the only words in his repertoire. Joyce flinches, but doesn't say anything.

Jonathan is glaring daggers at his father.

Will pushes his baked potatoes around the plate.

"My mom always says that if you don't have anything nice to say, then you shouldn't say anything," says Mike.

Joyce drops her fork; it clatters against the porcelain of the dish.

Dustin clears his throat, too loudly even for him. Lucas' eyes are flying between Mike and Lonnie, a warning in his gaze for Mike to thread carefully with a man double his size.

“Does she? Well, maybe she should teach you to keep your mouth shut, kid.”

“You’re being rude to Mrs. Byers,” says Mike, because sometimes he doesn’t know when to stay silent. “And Will doesn’t want you here.”

“You know what my son wants now?”

“Better than you, yeah.”

“Mike, please, drop it,” Will mutters, eyes wide and imploring.

“See, my son doesn’t want your input, frog face.”

“Don’t call him that,” says Will, his eyes now narrowed.

“Why not? He looks like a frog.”

Mike wonders when that insult stopped cutting as deep as it used to. Maybe it was when he thought the police had fished Will’s corpse from a lake.

“He doesn’t. And you have no right to speak to him like that. And he’s right: I don’t want you here!”

“You saying that cause you want to suck his dick or something?”

“That’s enough!” screams Mrs. Byers, rising from the table. “Get out.”

“Will is my son,” answers Lonnie, who has also stood up. “I have the right to spend his birthday with him.”

“Not when he doesn’t want you here. Nobody does! Get the hell out of our house!”

She starts pushing him away, but Lonnie barely budes. They are insulting each other, and Will has tears running down his cheeks, and Mike is going to crack a plate open on Lonnie’s head like he’s breaking an egg, and suddenly Jonathan is stepping in front of his mother and shoving Lonnie to the floor.

“You heard us. Get the hell out!” shouts Jonathan, aiming a kick at

his father's side. Lonnie scurries away just before the shoe connects with his body, and crawls to the door.

"You're all insane!"

"At least we're not assholes!" Mrs. Byers throws back in a shrill voice.

Lonnie gives her the finger and shuts the door with a bang. The rumble of an engine comes from outside and, seconds later, tires squeal against the gravel outside. Arching headlights cross the front windows and disappear into the night. Mrs. Byers and Jonathan sit back down.

"I didn't want you to see that," she says as she ruffles Will's hair.

"People like him are really bad news, Mrs. Byers," says Lucas.

"I know," says Mrs. Byers, hand on the back of her neck. "Let's sit down and eat a little more."

They finish their food in silence.

Cutting and eating the cake is more fun, because Lonnie's shadow has become distant.

They watch Cujo after that, squished on the couch.

Will falls asleep on his shoulder. Mike doesn't mind. (he doesn't admit that he likes it).

He's 18; Will is 13. He doesn't remember the last time they came to the quarry, but he missed it. It's been three weeks since the Mindflayer. Since Will had an extra-dimensional monster burned out of him. Since Bob died.

The waters of the lake at the bottom of the quarry barely move beneath the setting light of the sun. The skies are turning red, bleeding clouds flying above them.

Will throws a stone into the lake. They watch it sink.

“Do you think she blames me?”

“For what happened to Bob? No way, Will, mom would never blame you. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I was acting as a spy for it, and Bob was there helping me.”

“You weren’t in control of your actions, Will. Did you want Bob to die?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, you didn’t kill him. The Mindflyer did. Mom knows that. We all do,” he says, throwing a stone of his own. Sun glints off the metal of the radio he brought with them.

Will stares at him for a few long seconds, hair blowing slightly in the cool wind that encompasses the quarry. “I told you I was a freak,” he says, finally, and he makes the word ‘freak’ sound like the worst insult he’s ever heard.

Jonathan doesn’t answer at first. He fixes his gaze on the lake, then on the bleeding skies, then on the calm waters again. This place should be terrifying, he thinks, after Will’s supposed body was found here. Even without that, a desolate quarry, a corner of the world so quiet their voices are loud as claps of thunder, a cliff-side that can lead one to their death with one measly slip, all that should have been frightening enough. But it has never been, and it will never be. You can’t fear a place that’s so familiar, that has always signified peace.

“When you disappeared last year, we all came together to find you: mom and I, Hopper, The Party, Eleven, Nancy. There was a point where I was with Nancy, mom and Hopper, and we needed to find Mike, Lucas, Dustin and El, you know, well we didn’t know about El yet, but whatever, the point is that we had no idea where they were, and suddenly I remembered your radio. We raced to get it, managed to get in touch with Mike’s, and that way, with the four of them. You were in a parallel, horrible world, but you still brought us together.”

Will’s lips are parted, his eyes huge. No sound escapes him. There are

many stories from that time that they've never told him.

"Or, years ago, remember that day that Mike, Lucas and Dustin came here with us? I was reluctant to let them come with us, because I thought this place was ours. Just ours. But once we were here, and we were all in silence, just enjoying it, I understood that this place could also be theirs. That ours could mean more than just the two of us. We came together for you back then, we came together for you last year, and three weeks ago. We'll always come together for you. You may be a freak, but that doesn't mean you are not loved."

Will hugs him, arms tight around his waist. Jonathan bends down, rubs his back, pats his shoulders. Will is sniffing, and Jonathan hopes he will understand how loved he is.

They break apart, and Will wipes his eyes with the sleeve of his green jacket. His nose is red, partly because of the cold, and partly because of the crying.

"Mike and Lucas have girlfriends now. It won't be long before Dustin does, too. Why would they care about me then?" he asks, as if it had been bothering him for a while.

Jonathan doesn't mention that he doesn't know if Mike and Eleven are together yet. Nor does he acknowledge the particular inflection in Will's voice when he said Mike's name. That's not really the point of this conversation.

"Even if they become lovesick fools, they won't abandon you. None of you will abandon each other, no matter what happens."

"You really believe that?"

"Course I do. Can you see yourself leaving them? Or see any of them abandoning you for good? See Mike leaving you out on the curb under the metaphorical rain?"

He raises his eyebrows in question. Will shakes his head.

"Will!" comes from above them. It's Mike.

"What'd I tell you?" he says, and Will slaps his shoulder.

Mike's voice comes again, joined by Lucas' and Dustin's.

"We're here!" Will hollers in return.

"Where?"

"Down by the lake!" Jonathan shouts, and they hear footsteps and wheels rolling against the gravel, heading in their direction.

"What are you doing here?" Will asks when his three friends come into view, panting and hauling their bikes behind them.

"Mike called you on the radio, but you weren't picking up," Lucas answers. "So, he called us, freaking out, and we went to your house. Your mom said you had gone out with Jonathan."

"We figured you'd be here," adds Dustin.

"Come on, then, we were going to listen to some music," says Will, tilting his head towards the radio.

Mike hesitates for a beat before joining them, and Jonathan notices that he doesn't relax until he's almost plastered to Will's side. His brother whispers something in his ear, Mike nods twice, and takes a deep breath. Will's fingers graze Mike's, just like they did last time they were all here, and Mike's shoulders drop even further, returning to a semblance of calm.

Jonathan inserts his tape, and a familiar mix of guitars, synths, and drums comes on, making everyone light up.

Mike sings along with Bowie, surprisingly in tune. Will joins him, even though he's tone deaf, and neither seems to care.

"We can beat them, forever and ever," they sing, Mike's arm slung around Will's shoulder.

"I, I will be king," Lucas intones, hands extending towards the waters.

"And you, you'll be queen," Dustin sings, or rather, screams. Lucas rolls his eyes at him as Will and Mike continue singing and waltzing together, metres away from the lake. Their shoes scrape against the

rocks as they turn in circles.

“And the shame was on the other side, oh we can beat them, forever and ever. Then we can heroes, just for one day,” the five of them sing together, at the top of their lungs, interrupting the soundlessness of the quarry.

One song follows after the other, and the sky grows darker and darker. Storm clouds gather in the distance, but they never stop singing and dancing, stomping their feet to the rhythm of the mixtape Jonathan spent the weekend preparing.

Freddy Mercury’s voice echoes around the craggy surface of the quarry, and a bolt of lightning cracks open the clouds on the other side of the forest.

“Shouldn’t we leave?” asks Dustin.

“It’s alright, Dustin, it won’t hurt us,” says Will, looking at where another bolt is painting the quarry and the woods white-blue. “We’re safe.”

The music plays on. The thunder and lightning become accompaniments. The five of them stay right where they are.

Will is glaring at him with gleaming eyes. Mike doesn’t know what’s making him feel choked up: the muggy June heat of his basement, or Will’s disappointment.

“You said we could hang out,” Will says, swiping his fringe away from his eyes. His hair shines under the warm yellow light of the basement, turning into spun gold. Mike, for a second, wonders if it’s as soft as it looks.

“I know, I know, but El wants to see me, and what should I tell her?”

“No, sorry, I already had plans.”

“Our plan is to watch a movie and gorge ourselves on popcorn,” he says.

He doesn't mention that he does want to do that. He thinks Will knows it, but neither of them says it. Will sighs and begins shoving the snacks and drawings he had brought into his backpack. It's been ages since Will showed him a drawing.

He almost reaches out to grasp these ones before they disappear into the folded blue canvas.

"I'm sorry, Will."

"Sure you are," Will says. "Just like you were sorry the last five times you did this."

"I'm not the only one hanging out with his girlfriend."

"Lucas also spends time with us, or he brings Max and they spend time together, *and* with us. And him and I went to the arcade yesterday. Besides, this is about the two of us, not Lucas, and you know it."

He does, but he doesn't want to admit it. (there are a lot of things he doesn't want to admit).

"We can hang out tomorrow."

"Yeah, sure. Goodbye, Mike."

And he moves to go up the stairs. He stops at the bottom, takes a deep breath, as if he was about to say something, but he shakes his head and practically sprints out of the basement.

From the open door, Mike can hear him saying goodbye to his mother.

He thinks of Will's smile when he greeted him at the door an hour ago.

He thinks of Will's glare and wet eyes five minutes ago.

"He's gonna drive me completely mental one of these days," Mike murmurs as he shoots up the staircase.

He catches Will on the porch, legs on either side of his bike, feet on the pedals.

“Come back, I’ll call her and tell her I can’t hang out today.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, come on. I wanna see those drawings before we go to the mall.”

Will drops his bike and doesn’t care about leaving it upright. He merely follows Mike inside, already unzipping his bag. From the corner of his eyes, Mike sees him smiling softly, and knows he made the right call.

He’s 19; Will is 14. They’re leaving Hawkins in two weeks. Will and him are about to leave the house to visit the quarry.

“Where are you going?” asks El (or Jane, he’s still not sure what to call her).

Will and him lock eyes, weighing whether to bring her along or not. They silently reach the same conclusion: she’s family now. Will nods, and beckons El to the door.

“We’re going to the quarry. Wanna come with us?”

“Okay,” El says, voice low and quivery.

They walk leisurely, trampling the grass and the dry soil underneath their feet. El stares wide-eyed at the sky, tracks the clouds moving across their blue highway. Will talks in bursts, complaining about the forthcoming move. He never comments anything when mom is in the room, but when she’s not, it doesn’t seem possible for him to quell the pain the change causes.

“Mike will miss us,” says El.

“Yeah,” says Will, and in a feat of honesty adds, “and we’re gonna miss him.”

El's eyes rise to meet Will's and they stay there for the last beats of their trek to the quarry. El pats Will's shoulder once, gently.

Ants are crawling across the gravel, carrying leaves on their backs, brown cutting across the grey. The three of them are careful not to step on them as they approach the edge and sit down. Will takes out the radio from his backpack and turns it on immediately. At first, the only thing they get is static, but eventually he tunes into a station whose signal can reach them, and music filters into the quarry, bouncing off its raggedy edges.

"Have you ever been here?" asks Jonathan.

"Once. Mike jumped into the lake, but I caught him," El answers, as naturally as if she were talking about what they had for dinner last night.

Will's head snaps towards her so abruptly Jonathan is surprised his neck doesn't get whiplash.

"What?"

"It was years ago," El says, haltingly, like she realises that this is new information to them. "When you were in the Upside Down, some mouthbreathers were bothering him and Dustin. Mike jumped."

"Did he say anything about why he jumped?" Jonathan asks. Will is breathing hard.

"Just that they were threatening Dustin, but his mind felt strange."

"Strange how?" Will asks, voice choked up.

"I don't know, I can't describe it," El answers. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he says, because Will doesn't seem capable of saying anything. "It's a good thing you were there to save him."

"That's what friends do," she says, tapping her fingers against her knee. She's trying to imitate the rhythm of the song playing on the radio.

“Yeah,” says Will. “Thank you, for saving him.”

El smiles, and pats Will’s hand, twice. Jonathan has no doubt that Will is going to persuade Mike into talking about this the next time they see each other.

That’s when Jonathan notices the song playing. “I love this song,” he says.

“What’s it called?” El wonders.

“Everybody Wants to Rule the World.”

“It sounds happy, but it’s actually kind of sad,” says Will.

El listens attentively, head tilted towards the radio, fingers still tapping. By the time it comes to an end, she declares her approval, and wants to listen to it again.

“I’ll make you a mixtape before we leave,” Will says.

They stay there till nightfall, mostly in silence. The conversation, when it happens, is uttered softly, as if none of them want to break the peace this place creates.

The quarry is, as usual, empty. Well, the birds hiding in the foliage, and the trees themselves could be said to be company, but they offer no words, so Mike doesn’t count them.

It’s just him in the quarry, looking over the side of the cliff and into the dark liquid mirror that waits below.

The sight is scarily familiar.

It would be less scary if Will were here. (he would have never let him come alone, not when he knows what happened while he was gone the first time).

But he’s not. Neither is Jonathan, who acted as the adult even when he wasn’t one yet whenever they came here; neither is El, who

rescued him the last time he tumbled – purposefully – over the edge.

Dustin and Lucas have no idea he is here. They are supposed to be holed up in their houses, studying for finals. If Dustin knew he is here, he would be hyperventilating and calling everyone in their extended Party screaming CODE RED. Lucas would tell him to start talking so they can find a solution to whatever his problem is.

But it's just him here, in the quiet.

The freak lightning that showed up the last time they were all here would be fun to watch again, but he knows it won't appear this time.

He kicks his feet in the air, watches a bird take flight and fade away into the golden horizon.

He takes his mixtape out of his jacket pocket, puts it in the radio he brought, and presses play. He fists his hands to warm the tips of his fingers as the first riff replaces the non-existent sound waves of the quarry. His heart thumps to the rhythm.

“Darling, you’ve got to let me know, should I stay or should I go?” he sings in a low voice that is drowned out by the much louder tape.

He sings this song that he doesn't even like that much, and wishes the lightning came back, and brought El, Jonathan, and Mrs. Byers with it.

Wishes it brought Will back to him.

He's 20; Will is 15. A month has gone by since they had to close the gate – again – in order to destroy the new and improved version of the Mindflayer. Two weeks have gone by since the Byers returned to Hawkins. Mike still follows Will and El around like he's afraid they'll disappear if he doesn't; Max still calls El every morning to see what they are going to do that day; Nancy still embraces him tightly in her sleep.

Mom still wakes up screaming from nightmares, but now Hopper is the first one to comfort her, lying next to her on the bed. He will

never be his father, nor Will's, but he's El's, and their mom loves him, so Jonathan has learned to accept him. Fortunately, the three of them sat their parents down three weeks ago to make it clear they weren't going to stand them fighting 24/7.

Hopper still needs to write down his feelings before he tries saying them out loud. Mom thinks it's sweet.

They are at the quarry. All of them: Jonathan, The Party, mom, Nancy, Hopper, Steve, Robin, and Erica.

Originally, it was going to be him, Will and El, but then Will told Mike, and Mike invited The Party, and Dustin had to tell Steve, who brought Robin, and the three of them (and Lucas, even if he would never say it) wanted Erica to come along, and then mom found out and decided she couldn't allow them to go alone, and where she (and El) went, Hopper followed, and at that point Jonathan just resigned himself to the whole gang coming, and called up Nancy because he wasn't going to leave his girlfriend out.

That's why they are all standing in a line, steps from the edge.

Will shot Mike a look when they arrived, which Mike responded to with a reassuring shake of his head and a smile.

"I consider this child endangerment, just saying," Erica says, lips pursed and one eyebrow raised.

"I can't believe you're scared," says Dustin. "It's not dangerous."

"You were totally freaked out the first time we came here," says Lucas.

"That's not true!"

"Uh, yeah, it is," says Lucas, hands on his hips.

"I wouldn't say it's child endangerment, but it's dangerous," says mom. "How long have you been coming here?"

"Will and I since he was five."

“Five? Jesus Christ, you could have fallen off, or been attacked by a weirdo, or who knows what’s in these woods, oh my God –”

“Mom, nothing happened,” Will interrupts her. “We kept each other safe.”

“And this place is kind of amazing,” Mike adds.

“It managed to keep Dustin quiet,” Lucas says.

“I didn’t think that was possible,” says Robin.

“I don’t talk that much,” Dustin says, voice nearing a screech. “My mom and Mrs. Byers never complain when I talk to them about my experiments and my creations.”

“That’s because your mom is supposed to listen to you,” says Steve, “and Mrs. Byers is too kind to stop you. She barely said anything when we put an inter-dimensional monster in her fridge.”

“You put a what where?” asks Robin, eyes flying from Steve to Dustin at breakneck speed.

“It was a scientific discovery!” Dustin screams. The words travel back to them from the chasm metres away from their feet.

“It was disgusting,” says Max, arms crossed over her chest.

“I don’t understand why I hang out with you,” Erica mutters.

“We went through very strange things together,” Robin answers.

“We could try and keep quiet,” Jonathan says, now that he has a brief opening. “It was kind of the point of coming here.”

“So, we just don’t speak? For how long?” asks Max.

“Until you can feel the quiet,” answers Will.

It takes a few minutes, but one by one, they all fall completely silent. The sound of their breathing is swallowed by the whisper of the tree branches bending to the wind around them. Birds twitter.

El throws a rock into the lake, and a faint plopping sound reaches them.

Mike is the first one to sit down. Will and Jonathan follow suit, and then, one by one, they all fold themselves on the ground, legs hanging over the verge.

Will kicks his feet in the air; El, Robin, Erica, and Steve echo his movements.

Many, many minutes later, Dustin breaks the stillness. "It feels like the possibilities are endless, like I could build whatever I imagined. In this place, I mean."

"Like you could change the world," says Lucas. "As if the whole future was just an opportunity to change the world for the better."

"It's a good spot to think with no one and nothing bothering you," Nancy murmurs, wonderingly.

"I thought it would be an empty quiet, like the one in my house, but it's not. It's not empty at all," says Steve, hands gripping a stone. When he finishes speaking, he throws it in a wide arc, and the stone rockets down to the waters, sinking rapidly.

"Yeah, like the way Lucas and I are quiet while we read comics," says Erica, smiling over at her brother.

Robin is swinging her legs from side to side, a human pendulum. She ruffles Steve's hair, whispers something in his ear.

"It's nice," Max says. "It's safe."

Lucas clasps her hand. El envelops her shoulders with her left arm. Jonathan remembers a comment Will made about her step-father and step-brother being Lonnie-like assholes.

"I get why you came here," mom declares. "It must have been so peaceful."

She doesn't need to say anything more: the three of them know what it was like, when Lonnie still lived with them.

Hopper lights a cigarette, and the smoke flies up like a thin balloon.

“We should do this more often,” Mike suggests, and no one opposes the idea.

The early afternoon rays fall across Will’s table and paint his white sheets of paper golden, create new shadows in his drawings, reveal dust motes that are hanging in the air. The smell of incoming rain drifts through a thin sliver where the window is not shut; a brown leaf slips inside, flutters to the ground.

Mike crunches it beneath the sole of his trainer as he paces past.

“Do you think I should try harder?”

“You asked El to get back with you. She said you’re better off as friends. What more do you want to do?” Will retorts, back against the headboard of his bed.

It’s just them in the re-bought Byers house.

“But the boys at school are always chasing after the girls, begging for forgiveness when they screw up. Even my dad says I should put more effort into it.”

Will pulls his eyes from his drawing at that last sentence. His eyebrows are close to his hairline – visible now that he got rid of the bowl cut – and a snort is waiting behind his lips. He lets it escape soon enough.

“Your dad is not exactly the most passionate man I’ve ever met.”

“I know, I know, but maybe he has a point.”

“I think you should respect her wishes,” Will says, putting his notebook and pencil aside. “If she just wants to be friends with you, you should respect that. Chasing people who don’t wanna be caught is not cool, Mike.”

“Of course not, I’d never do that. I was thinking of doing a grand

gesture or something,” Mike says. He rubs the back of his neck before continuing. “Like taking her to the movies, or buying her a gift – what do you think she would like? – and talking to her.”

“She already talked to you,” Will says, standing up and twisting his wrist. “You talked, and she told you the truth.”

Rain begins to patter against the window, stray drops of water falling on the edge of the table beneath it. Will runs to close it. Mike picks up a pen and clicks it open and shut once, and again, and again, and only stops when Will covers his hand with his.

“Do you even want to get back together with her?”

Mike doesn’t understand why Will would ask something like this, when the answer is so obvious.

(he knows what’s the obvious answer to Will, but he doesn’t know if he can admit it’s *his* obvious answer, as well).

Will’s hands are soft and warm, and Mike feels the tension bleeding out of him, as if he was standing outside, the rain cleansing his thoughts.

“Of course I do.”

“Do you, really?” Will insists.

Mike bites his lip. He shouldn’t confess what his real answer is, but it’s Will. He would never judge him.

Mike shakes his head once, flicks his eyes to the window and watches the rain form rivulets across the glass, creating imaginary fragments like the freak lightning did in the quarry, all those years ago.

Will takes the pen away and drops his hands. He turns to his table, picks up the radio, and presses play. The song is unfamiliar to Mike, but Will is grinning at him, and taking his hand again.

“Then, don’t fight for something you don’t even want,” Will says, as he grips his other hand. “Fight for something you do want.”

And he pulls Mike closer, and farther away, and into a spin. Before Mike realizes what's happening, they are dancing in Will's room to a synth-heavy song, one that seems more alike to Mike's tastes than to Will's.

Will spins Mike, and Mike returns the favour. Their arms cross over their heads and necks, and they trace a circle on the floor, arms interlocked. Mike lets go of Will's right hand, pushes him until they stand apart, their arms stretched as their only link, until he pulls him to his side like a rubber band snapping back to its original form.

Will laughs as he stumbles over the rug, crashing against Mike instead of meeting his body gracefully. Mike laughs with him.

A man sings about leaving his hometown in a high voice. Will and Mike dance until they're breathing heavily.

As the singer utters words about a "*little black case*" for what seems like the final time, Mike makes a snap decision and carefully dips Will.

Will stares up at him with wide, bright eyes. The light above them flares up, its shine steadily becoming blinding, but neither shuts his eyes. Instead, they keep them open in time to see all the lights in the room – the one above, the old lamp on the bedside table, the new one on the desk that Will uses when he draws, the one in the hallway just outside the door – grow in intensity.

The radio turns off on its own.

The lights grow dimmer and dimmer until they begin flickering, like eyes blinking rapidly.

Will is blinking rapidly, and his eyes are still bright, but not from joy. They are bright because tears are forming inside them, a miniature lake being created in the flesh and bone quarry of Will's face.

Mike rights them. Will steps away, opens his mouth to speak, closes it. He turns towards the door.

Jonathan is standing in the doorway, gaping.

He's 20; Will is 15. And he's pushing past him. He hurries to the front door that slams closed moments after – whether by Will's hand, or the wind's.

Mike and him share a look. The next second they are running down the hallway and out the door. They see Will sprinting into the forest, and chase after him, feet pounding the ground, throats opening to scream for Will to stop. They swallow rainwater as they shout.

Will doesn't stop. Neither do Mike and Jonathan.

They follow him through the forest, jump over the same branches, narrowly avoid the same trees, crunch the same fallen leaves. Their clothes stick to their bodies, wet and cold, and Jonathan feels icy streams falling down his back. Mike wipes and pushes his dripping bangs from his face.

Will careens to a stop metres from the cliff-side of the quarry, gravel flying up in his wake. Jonathan and Mike lurch to a stop behind him, clutching onto each other so as not to topple to the rough ground.

"Will, we need to talk," Jonathan screams over the roar of the storm.

"Will, are you okay?" Mike shouts, moving closer to Will.

Forked lightning splits the sky open, throwing the shadows under Will's eyes into sharp relief. Jonathan can't tell if the water on Will's cheeks is from the rain or from his tears.

Another bolt of lightning reaches into the earth.

"Buddy, you need to calm down," Jonathan says. "Take a deep breath, in and out, with me."

He does the motions, and flicks his eyebrows upwards until Mike joins him. The two of them inhale and exhale slowly, counting their breaths.

A clap of thunder precedes the third lightning strike.

Will follows the rhythm of their breathing. In and out. In and out, until the three are inhaling and exhaling in synch, and the rain lets up a bit.

Will chokes on a sob and tumbles to the floor, knees hitting the rocks beneath, ripping his wet jeans open. He puts his arms around his thin frame, squeezes himself. He makes himself as small as possible, like he used to when they were kids and Lonnie got violent.

Jonathan reaches for his hands, drags them apart so he can hug Will properly. It takes a few moments, but finally Will relaxes into the embrace and bunches Jonathan's jacket up in his hands. Jonathan senses Mike crawling across the gravel to hug Will from his other side.

As the heavy downpour turns into a light drizzle, they remain locked in their human ball, arms and legs and heads intertwined; not even a lightning bolt could break them apart.

"I have powers," Will says, voice scratchy, as they are walking back to the house. He's shivering, even with Jonathan's jacket on his shoulders.

"Yeah, but you're still Will," says Mike.

Will breathes in deep.

"Why are we here, exactly? Steve asks. He's leaning on the kitchen doorframe. Dustin stands next to him with his hands on his hips.

"We just had our weekly quarry gathering yesterday," says Robin, who sits cross-legged on the floor in front of the couch, El next to her.

"We need to tell you something," says Mike, shoulders firm where he stands on Will's left.

"You and Will?" asks Max.

"And me," says Jonathan, on Will's right.

“Let’s hear it,” says Hopper, lighting a cigarette.

“I have powers,” Will blurts it out as if ripping the band-aid off will mean less pain.

Hopper chokes out what little smoke he had inhaled.

Steve trips over his feet and needs Dustin to catch him.

“Come again?” says Mrs. Byers in a tremulous voice. She takes Hopper’s lighter from his pocket and frantically fires up her own cigarette. “Sweetie, what are you talking about?”

“I have powers, like El,” says Will. “Well, not exactly, but pretty close.”

“He can make lights flicker and flare,” says Mike.

“And create lightning,” adds Jonathan.

“And I think I can tell the future,” finishes Will.

“True Sight,” says Lucas, running his hands through his hair.

“Exactly,” says Mike.

“Which is half the reason why we asked you all to come here,” says Jonathan.

“To tell us Will has powers? You could have called; I have homework,” says Erica.

“Not just to let you know I have powers. We’ve known for months now, that’s not the point. What matters is that we’ve been trying to pin-point what I can and cannot do, and at first we thought that maybe my True Sight had been temporary, a fluke while I was possessed. But yesterday, I dreamed of the Upside Down.”

“What did you see, sweetie?”

“Monsters,” says Will. “But not just the Demogorgon, or the Demodogs, or the Mindflayer. I saw dozens of monsters, kinds we

haven't even seen before. And they're all waiting to come here."

"They are waiting for The Gate to be opened again," says El.

Will nods.

"So we make sure nobody opens it," says Hopper.

"There will always be a risk," says Mike. "Some government could try to use it as a weapon, or people like El and Will could accidentally open it, or even from the inside, we have no idea if there aren't other creatures in there who could discover a way to breach the gap between worlds from the Upside Down."

"What do we do, then?" asks Robin.

"That's the other half of the reason we asked you to come here, because we're going to need to do this together," says Jonathan.

"Do what?" asks Joyce.

"Find a way to destroy the Upside Down," says Will.

It's been six months since they began Operation Destroying Upside Down (ODUD, for short). Dustin knows the D&D manual back-to-back; Robin can now also speak fluent Russian and German; Will can compel lightbulbs to explode with a flick of his wrist; El, Will, and Max spend their free-time reading fantasy books in order to find inspiration, or with Max overseeing Will and El's practice sessions; Lucas spends two hours every week speaking with an Swedish scientist who is trying to discover the key to anti-matter.

Mike has no idea what to do, but he tries to research as much as he can. The librarian doesn't even lift her head from her books when he enters, and Mrs. Byers is used to him sleeping on the floor next to Will's bed four nights a week.

His parents are not that happy with that development, but Mike has neither the time nor the energy to care.

It comforts him as much as it does Will.

Something that he and Will have taken up in the past few months is going to the quarry on Wednesdays, come rain or cold or overbearing heat. Like tonight, two weeks into their Junior year, they run away after dinner and get down to the lake, standing on its rock-strewn shore.

Will picks up stones, throws them into the waters, and they watch them skip along its malleable surface, creating rings of waves that disappear once the stone sinks and the water settles down.

Will is gazing at the lake, eyes following the skipping stones. His eyelashes curl high, like thin chocolate shavings you would see on a cake. His hair and eyes reflect the light from the moon, and Mike can't stop himself.

He kisses him, a brief peck on the corner of his lips.

Will is gazing at him now, and Mike should be stepping away, but he can't.

He opens his mouth – to say what, he is not sure – but Will kissing him steals the words from his brain. He holds Will's face in his hands, and he thinks he's never felt more at home.

He's 22; Will is 17. The onset of the fall season can be seen in the fallen leaves that clutter the streets, or in the fewer hours of sunlight available. Temperatures are steadily dropping, preparing for the winter months; the humidity of the summer has departed from Hawkins. Teenagers vibrate with the need to fill out college applications, or prepare for exams after a peaceful summer.

The (extended) Party is more concerned by the fact that Will hasn't shown up for Quarry Day.

"Did he tell you he was going somewhere?" Mom asks Mike. There's no one in their Party that doesn't know they are together.

"No, he didn't say anything," says Mike. His lips are bitten red; his

soles squeak against the scratched wooden floor as he walks from one side of the sitting room to the other. "But he's been weird, the last couple of days."

"Weird how?" asks El.

"Quieter, but not his normal kind of quiet. Like he was thinking really hard about something, but I just kinda assumed he was thinking about college."

"He could be somewhere out there thinking about that," says Nancy.

"If he went anywhere to think, it would be the quarry," Jonathan says.

"And he would let somebody know," adds mom.

"We always go to Quarry Day together," says Mike. "The few times he got held up, he was never later than ten minutes. And now it's been two hours. Something is wrong."

"But what? What could have happened to him?" asks Max.

"Maybe it has something to do with ODUD," answers Lucas, fingers interlocked as if in prayer where he sits on the middle of the couch, the cushion sunken-in. "Did he find anything?"

"Not that I know of," says Jonathan. "He would have told us."

"I don't know if there's anything to be found, either," begins Dustin as he fiddles with Will's broken radio (he burned it last week). "It seems like the rules of that world change for unknown, inexplicable reasons. One day, it only houses a monster that is attracted by blood; the next, this monster becomes dozens of mini-monsters; the next, it absorbs people to become a *different* mega-monster. And then, for long periods of time, there's nothing, because apparently no one has tried to open The Gate, and the monsters seem unable to get free on their own. It feels like a writer making up a story as they go."

"Like the stories I used to write as a kid," says Mike.

"Sometimes, I don't know why we bother. As long as no one opens

The Gate, we should be fine,” says Dustin.

“But someone or something could open it,” says Lucas.

“And it could have taken Will,” Erica finishes her brother’s thought.

“And we still don’t know how to destroy it,” says Steve, waving his hands in the air like he is batting away a fly. “And we need Will to destroy it because of his powers. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we don’t even know why the hell this place exists.”

“What do you mean?” asks Hopper.

“Think about it, if you wanted to destroy something, shouldn’t you be aware of its origins? It must have originated somehow, like our world, didn’t an explosion happen in space?”

“The Big Bang,” says Robin.

“Yeah, that. Well, was the Upside Down created in this Big Bang, or later?”

“We can discuss the creation of other dimensions once we find Will!” Mike shouts, breaking the debate that had started up about the origins of the Upside Down. He’s clutching one of Will’s drawings, unconsciously caressing it, and Jonathan travels back in time for an instant, remembers an old conversation, its edges blurred by age.

“Mirrors,” he mutters. He flicks his eyes up to Mike’s and sprints to the bathroom.

On the corner of the mirror, there is a small slip of paper wedged between the metal frame and the glass that reads *I’M SORRY. I LOVE YOU.*

“Sorry about what?”

“That sounds bad, really bad,” says Steve.

“It’s a mirror world,” says Jonathan.

“What are you talking about?” asks Nancy, shoved against the towel

bar by the press of bodies inside the bathroom.

“Years ago, we were in the quarry, on the cliff, and Will said something about the lake beneath being a mirror into another world, or something like that. He was talking about this other world, this mirror-world, as if it were totally possible, and I thought it was nothing because he was like eight. But what if it wasn’t nothing?”

“You think Will could have created the Upside Down?” Mike asks, eyebrows pulled together in a disbelieving frown.

“He has powers, and Dustin is right, the rules of the world seem to change constantly, especially years ago, when Will was much younger. If he didn’t know what he was doing, he could have been altering this world every time he wrote a campaign or drew something. He could have thought it was a possible story idea for the future but in reality, it was being absorbed into this mirror-world.”

“I’m not saying it’s impossible, because we clearly don’t know a lot about this world, or even Will’s powers,” says Nancy, “but why would he create it in the first place?”

“Quiet,” whispers El. She moves past Jonathan and Mike, and steps in front of the mirror. She raises her hand to touch the glass, and her fingers leave a trail of condensation on the cool glass. “If he put the noise in that world, it could keep this one quiet, like the quarry.”

No one utters a word. El picks up the note from the basin where Jonathan had dropped it, folds it in half and stores it in her jeans pocket.

“He is trying to destroy it on his own,” says Mike. His voice is firm and calm, but his hands are shaking at his sides, and Jonathan sees the slight quiver in his lip. “He realised what he did, and he is blaming himself for it, and he is trying to destroy it on his own.”

“How could it be his fault when he didn’t even know he could do this?” asks Steve.

“It doesn’t need to be his fault for him to feel like it is,” says Nancy.

“And he can’t do this alone,” says Lucas. “This is too big for anyone

to do on their own.”

They run out of the house and into the cars waiting outside as El screams that he must be at the Lab, which makes sense, considering that was the original opening of The Gate. Nancy guns the accelerator until they are flying down the road, Hopper and Steve driving in the cars behind, taking everyone else. Mike is sniffing in the backseat, and Nancy’s knuckles are going white from how hard she is gripping the wheel, and Jonathan can’t think of anything but Will alone in that world, with no one to catch him if he falls.

They haul every weapon and flashlight they have stored in their trunks and race to the drab building. They find the doors to the Lab on the ground, torn from their hinges, and step over the broken glass hurriedly as they follow Hopper down darkened linoleum corridors. Erica, Dustin, Max and Robin are carrying flashlights. Nancy and Hopper have their shotguns up and ready; Steve holds his nailed bat by his side; Lucas, his slingshot; Jonathan carries his axe.

When they enter the room where The Gate used to be, all the lights in the room are on, throwing their faces into a chiaroscuro of reds and blues.

Metres away from the wall with a tear at its centre, Will is kneeling, back stooped and hands clawing at the floor as he sobs.

“My boy,” mom sobs, voice going high like it does when she cries. “Sweetie, it’s fine.” She steps closer to him, but he crawls away and towards The Gate.

“You have to go. You shouldn’t be here.”

“We weren’t going to leave you alone,” says Mike, hands reaching out towards his boyfriend.

“It’s dangerous,” Will chokes out. His eyes are bloodshot; the tear tracks on his cheeks can’t dry because new tears run down them every second. “I’m dangerous, you don’t know.”

“We know, Will, we know,” says El, gently.

“And we don’t blame you, sweetie, no one blames you. You didn’t

know what you were doing.”

“I swear I didn’t,” Will says in between bursts of sobbing. “I don’t know how I –”

“We know, babe, we can figure it out,” starts Mike, going to hug Will, but he flinches away from his touch and curls up on the grimy floor, head between his knees.

“I’m so-sorry, I-I’m so-sorry.”

“Did you want this to happen?” Jonathan asks, crouching in front of his brother. “Did you want to create this world, all those monsters? Did you want all those people to die? Did you want to be possessed and kidnapped? Did you want any of that?”

“No!”

“I can’t hear you.”

“NO!”

“Then, it wasn’t your fault. You did it as an accident, unaware that you were doing anything more than making up a story. You did it because you’re a freak with powers, and we don’t love you any less for it. You may be a freak, but that doesn’t mean you are not loved, remember?”

Will lifts his head slowly, like a flower blossoming over the spring. His eyes are mirrors where Jonathan can see his own face with his own tear-filled eyes. Will flings himself at him, and he crushes him to his chest, runs his fingers through his hair like their mom always does when they have a nightmare. He lets Will cry against his shoulder.

Minutes later, Will’s shoulders stop shaking and he pulls away from the embrace. His face is blotchy but determined, and he accepts Mike’s hand to get up from the floor. With his right hand still encased in Mike’s, he turns to the fissure on the wall.

“Can you open it?” he asks El.

“Yes,” she answers as she takes a hold of his left hand.

“You should all go,” Will says. “This could be the most dangerous thing we’ve ever done.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you,” Mike says, locking eyes with Will. Jonathan knows, as does everyone in that room, that nothing – not even Will – could change Mike’s mind.

Mom grasps his left shoulder, as Hopper does the same with El.

“We’re seeing this through together,” says Lucas. He wraps one arm around Mike’s shoulders, and the other around his sister, who drifted closer and is now in front of him.

“I’m staying right here,” says Max, grasping El’s hand.

“We’ve gone through too much shit together to be anything less than family,” says Steve before placing a hand on Dustin’s shoulder, who has his own arm over Lucas’s shoulders. Robin glides forwards until she stands next to Steve, and Nancy slides closer to Jonathan, clutches his hand.

“We’ll be here till the end of time, buddy,” says Jonathan, and lays his other hand on Will’s right shoulder.

Will and El turn their heads and their eyes meet. They nod simultaneously, and El extends her arm in a familiar motion. A scream rips out of her as she forces The Gate open, the thin fissure breaking into spider-webs. Will extends his arm in a similar manner, and a cloud made of shadows emerges from the chasm, coalescing into a slimmer form, into a stream of darkness that stretches towards Will.

Jonathan squeezes his shoulder, and he thinks Will understands what he is trying to tell him.

When the stream breaks into pieces, and turns into a lightning bolt with thirteen fingers, he knows that Will understood.

The lightning bolts meet their skin. It stings slightly, and he smells charred clothing, but the pain is minimal, and he doesn’t feel any

different than he did minutes ago, if perhaps, a little older.

“Is everyone alright?” Hopper asks. No answers are forthcoming except for a silence full of wonder.

There is no crack in the wall.

There is no shadow lightning running between them.

“It’s gone,” Will states.

Jonathan thinks he’s never sounded so at peace.

The decorations for the ‘88 Snowball Dance are awful, Mike thinks. They are just a few strings of Christmas lights that graze the floor where they haven’t been hung up properly, red and green garlands that crash with the badly-painted blue snowflakes stapled on the walls of a gym that smells like it wasn’t cleaned thoroughly after the last P.E. class it housed.

To drive the knife in deeper, he is dancing with the same girl who once called Will ‘Zombie Boy’, all those years ago, in another Snowball.

If he’s honest, he would admit that there’s something depressing in how, despite everything that has changed, Will and him are still dancing with girls when they want to dance with each other.

Will twirls a beaming Jennifer Hayes, and Mike averts his eyes.

When the song is over, he mumbles his excuses and hurries into the hallway outside the gym. He slides down a locker until he is sitting there, legs straight in front of him. The door to the gym opens again, The Police spills out, and he looks up to see Will walking towards him. He doesn’t slide to the floor to sit next to Mike, however, but offers his hand.

Mike takes it, allows it to pull him up and out the double doors of the school. Will leads them to the football field where, with a snap of his fingers, the lights turn on. Will stops in the middle of the grounds,

raises one hand – palm facing the sky – and The Police begins to stream from the loudspeakers on the corners of the small stadium.

“May I have this dance?” Will asks, hand extended in invitation.

“Of course,” Mike answers, following Will’s lead as they glide across the grass. He knows his lips are stretching into the smile he only ever reserves for Will, the one that makes his eyes crinkle and his cheeks burn like a small bonfire has been started behind them.

One song turns into another, and into another, and the lights wink, one by one, before they fall into a rhythm where they beam down on them to the beat of the music. Will looks into his eyes, and the lights change colours – green, blue, red, orange, a warm gold – and the winks are interposed with longer, more powerful flashes.

“Beautiful,” Mike murmurs.

Will grins and sends him into a twirl.

The show of lights is not the only beautiful thing in the field.

He’s 23; Will is 18. The beginning of August brings with it a slow, barely noticeable descent in temperature, a lot of packing as everyone gets ready to leave Hawkins in two weeks, and more nostalgia than one would expect from the months that are supposed to only be filled with adventure, rest, and hours spent sitting in front of the fan passing an ice pack around.

It’s not the first time the behaviour of The Party (not extended anymore, just The Party) diverges from the expected average.

Jonathan is sure it won’t be the last.

Mike and Will got accepted to NYU (full-ride included, in Will’s case): the former is going to major in English, and his brother is majoring in Art, both decisions surprising absolutely no one. Jonathan, after a couple of years spent working to save up, and another few going to community college, is joining them to study Photography. Lucas won’t be too far, seeing as he’s doing Political Science at Columbia.

Dustin will be a bit further away, studying Mechanical Engineering at MIT. El and Max have decided to backpack across Europe and South America for a year: when they return, El plans to go into social work; Max, into film. (El also mentioned something about looking for Kali). Nancy graduated two months ago from Brown, one of the best students in her Journalism major; Robin is the next one on the graduation track, once she completes her senior year at Cornell and gets her Philosophy degree. Steve had followed a similar path to his, and Jonathan can tell he's excited about his Early Childhood Education degree at Temple.

Once mom realised that a majority of their family was heading to the East Coast, she persuaded Hopper to move there, as well. It didn't take much. She's spent the past week frantically boxing everything up, but the mood as they cover yet another box with tape is markedly different from the last time they did this, four years ago.

Erica can't stop complaining about everyone leaving, even if she knows that she will join them soon enough.

"I can't believe we're leaving this place," he says.

They are at the quarry, just him and Will. They decided months ago that they would say goodbye privately ahead of everyone else, and here they are, sitting in the same spot as always, hearing the same birds chirping from the trees, seeing the same waters greeting them from down below, feeling the same rocks scrape their hands.

"It feels surreal," Will says. "All these years living in this town, fighting for it sometimes, and now we're just leaving it. Just like that."

"Not completely, though," he says. At Will's confused look, he continues. "I don't think we're leaving this town for good."

"What are the chances of any of us moving back here?"

"Close to none. But that's not what I meant. I was thinking last night about all the memories I have of this town, good and bad, and I realised that I'm not the only one that's gonna keep them. All of us will keep our own memories of the spaces we inhabited, but more

than that, those places will also retain their own memories.

“Take this quarry, for example. We’ve been coming here for over a decade. It’s seen us through some of the best and worst moments of our lives; it’s seen us grow from a three-people family to a thirteen-people one; it’s seen us bond with people we never thought we could be close with, like Steve. I think that the quarry will keep those moments safe as well, and as long as it does, then a part of us will still be here.”

“An out-of-time, out-of-space imprint.”

“Exactly.”

“I get what you mean.”

“Does it scare you? Leaving it behind? The quarry may remember us, but it’ll be strange not having it at hand anymore.”

“I don’t think we need it anymore,” says Will, kicking his feet against the side of the cliff. Bits of rock tumble to the lake, but they never hear them meet the ground. “It will always be a special place, but we don’t need it anymore, you know?”

And Jonathan thinks of how Will expresses himself freely now, and talks back to their father whenever Lonnie dares to visit, how El rarely has nightmares anymore, how Mike doesn’t fidget or pace as much, how Dustin talks just a tiny bit less because he knows he will always be heard, no matter how much he talks or doesn’t talk, how Lucas shows no hesitation in his plans to change the world, how Steve opens his usually empty house to all of them whenever they need it, how Max doesn’t flinch at loud noises anymore, how Erica doesn’t hide the fact that she’s a nerd, how Robin is open about her sexuality with them, how mom sleeps for more than five hours a night, how Hopper smokes less and doesn’t drink at all, how Nancy focuses on her career unashamedly, even when her mom’s friends mock her behind her back.

He thinks of himself, and how he doesn’t need to hide in a quarry anymore because he’s scared of his father.

He thinks of Will and him stopping each other from falling over the edge, and he thinks of everyone else doing the same for each other. Till the end of time.

“Yeah, I know.”

Author's Note:

Hope you enjoyed it!

Songs mentioned:

"Everybody Wants To Rule The World" by Tears for Fears

"Should I Stay or Should I Go" by The Clash (title comes from this song)

"Smalltown Boy" by Bronski Beat

"Message In A Bottle" by The Police

"Heroes" by David Bowie

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